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sotto voce — Wherein the Author Continues his Quest for Truth — Distance Learning

by **Bob Schatz** (Vice-President of Sales, Academic Book Center) <bobs@acbc.com>

I admire truthfulness, especially when it may be an unpopular route to take. Take, for instance, the dedication **Dr. Paul Strange** put in his book, *Relativistic Quantum Mechanics* (Cambridge UP, 1998), which reads in its entirety: "Unlike so many other supportive families, mine did not proof-read, or type this manuscript, or anything else. In fact they played absolutely no part in the preparations of this book, and distracted me from it at every opportunity. They are not the slightest bit interested in physics and know nothing of relativity and quantum theory. Their lack of knowledge in these areas does not worry them at all. Furthermore they undermine one of the central tenets of the theory of relativity, by providing me with a unique frame of reference. Nonetheless, I would like to dedicate this book to them, Jo, Jessica, Susanna, and Elizabeth." Ah, if only all authors demonstrated such honesty!

As individuals and as a society, we think of truthfulness as a cherished value. That sacredness falls apart, though, when the truth gets in the way of the lore we've collectively created about significant past events, especially if those events stand as symbols of virtue, heroism, or how smart we, as a people, can be. Each generation of Americans passes along to its young the apocryphal story of **George Washington** and the cherry tree, but few of us want to know the details of his ownership of slaves. When evidence is unearthed refuting **Christopher Columbus's** claims to the initial "discovery" of the Americas, we only begrudgingly admit them to our school history books. And, while we celebrate our smug superiority over heathen races with the retelling of the story of the "purchase" of Manhattan from the Indians for sixty-four dollars worth of beads, how many of us know that those beads were actually paid to the wrong tribe.

Whether we know the real facts surrounding these people and events or not, we rarely let them get in the way of the way in which we want to feel about them. In the midst of our humdrum, ordinary existence, we hold onto these stories as evidence that our lives and our culture really are capable of noble things. In our desire to be bigger than who we are as individuals, we place people and events above us, because looking up makes us feel better. It's human nature. Every culture does it, and every culture's leaders play upon it to justify the continuance of their rule.

In the future, I wonder what lore will surround the **Western Governors University**, (or what I affectionately refer to as "Ol' Invisible U"). Will our recollection of this phenomenon

be based on the noble sounding values promoted in WGU's online literature, or will it allow ourselves to see the other agendas that were at work in the creation of this Education Without Boundaries, as their trademark calls it?

My concern about WGU is in what it will be turned into. Reaching out through distance learning to people who might not otherwise partake of higher education is a noble act. Using WGU as a model from which future institutions of higher education will be molded is something else altogether. Brand me a skeptic, but I can't help but believe that there's more going on here than distance education, and it has the potential to affect education and librarianship in significant ways.

The lore being woven by the founders of WGU is that this will be "a cyber university that is not bound by its location because it doesn't have a campus in the physical sense." Where "degree and certificate requirements aren't based on the number of college credits you have accumulated or core courses you have completed." This will be an institution "founded to promote cooperation between states and educational institutions to make the benefits of higher education accessible to all."

When it comes to the library, "WGU recognizes the importance of providing students with comprehensive, quality library resources and services." The Central Library, as they call it, will provide "access to a rich collection of electronic materials and services available to all WGU students at their convenience, 24 hours a day."

I guess we should start off by being thankful that they didn't actually name WGU after the specific eight governors who initiated the idea. Much as I disdain the hubris with which this "university" has been named, at least we don't have to call it Bill-Jack-Bob-Mike-Pete-Joe-Norman-Albert U. By any name you call it, this is a rose that has far more thorns than are being admitted to in the institution's literature.

What this university is all about is roads, and prisons, and pensions—the thousand-and-one things that governors would like to do with educational funding other than fund universities and libraries. While I have great sympathy for the economic tradeoffs state governments must make these days, faking a commitment to education in the name of forward-thinking development is unacceptable. Were we to accept this model, existing institutions of higher education, including their libraries, will be even more strained than they

are already. On top of their local constituents, they will now have to serve even more patrons at lower levels of reimbursement than they now enjoy. While it may be economically attractive to state governments to think that new populations of students can be served by solely making cyber-additions to existing educational facilities, I'm of the opinion that that's just a sales pitch designed to make less sound like more.

In spite of my own rather disappointing experiences in college, I also think that attending classes and studying in the company of classmates is preferable to sitting in the den, alone, "attending" class via television or computer. Distance education is far preferable to no education at all. That is inarguable, but it should not be touted as something more meaningful than being a part of a more traditional college or university community.

Those students who could attend a regular college or university (and by that I mean one with real buildings and real books in their libraries), but choose to attend WGU, will forego the socialization process that comes from being a part of a college community. Let's remember that higher education is supposed to be about sending more enriched, well-rounded individuals out into the community to make positive contributions, not just a process of certification. If that's all education is coming to, let's start by testing everyone now and awarding as many bachelor degrees as possible based solely on test scores.

For obvious reasons, I'm particularly concerned about the implications the WGU model has for existing and future libraries. I reject the notion that technology marginalizes libraries. I happen to think that buildings full of books and journals, coordinated with the intelligent use of technology, can and should remain as societal fixtures. If we accept the notion that classrooms without classmates is OK, and that granting degrees without requiring certain core course work is acceptable, then the idea of the invisible library is not so hard a truth to embrace. While I appreciate the miracle of the Internet and the plethora of

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Inside Pandora's Box
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that I am aware of is making anything approaching enormous profits. Quite the contrary. We are losing money on the provision of technical services. And margins on books—depressed by declining publisher discounts, individual library expectations of more discount, and the vendor's own quest for market share—are dangerously low. Booksellers are much like supermarkets. Pre-tax margins tend to be 3 to 4 percent; after taxes, our profits are about 1.5 to 2 percent, extraordinarily low by any measure. The explosion of consortia looking for higher discounts from strapped book vendors, with no guarantee of minimum expenditures, no central billing and shipping, and no standard technical services profiles will, I believe, diminish overall value for member libraries.

How much better if consortia would base the selection of a book vendor on fair price, excellence in everything the vendor does, and innovation. Put differently, consortia can produce far greater value if booksellers are considered partners in the arrangement rather than as outsiders. The destinies of libraries and booksellers are symbiotically tied. Propping up declining monographic budgets on the back of the vendor will eventually break its back—leaving libraries to deal directly with the publisher. If this were to happen, the resulting precipitous decline in customized services and efficiency would prove disastrous to the operational effectiveness of libraries.

While there is little disagreement over the effectiveness of consortia in negotiating favorable licensing and electronic information agreements, many libraries are questioning just how effective activities focused on book contracts will be. No two library approval profiles are exactly alike. No two library technical services profiles are exactly alike. Book supply, unlike the supply of electronic information, is highly customized.

Recently I asked leaders of several consortia for their views on what the future holds.

Dr. Gordon W. Smith, Director, Library Resources, **California State University Office of the Chancellor**, offered the following thoughts:

"My view of the future of library consortia is that networking technology—specifically the Internet and the World Wide Web—combined with advances in automated library systems will move us to an entirely new level of resource sharing and cooperative collection development. Networking of individual automated library systems within a consortium will permit the development of a combined 'virtual collection' from the library user's perspective: patron-initiated interlibrary circulation will replace librarian-mediated interlibrary loan; online browsing of tables of contents and indexes will replace browsing of shelves for many patrons.

"Cooperative collection development in this networked environment will be enhanced through the collection and analysis of item-level usage data. Libraries will be able to make 'ownership versus access' decisions on the basis of hard data generated automatically by the linked systems, a process that can yield automatic ordering requests for books based on patron demand. Consortium-wide circulation data combined with automated analysis of collection strengths and weaknesses will permit member libraries to fine-tune their collecting patterns to strengthen their essential core collections while also building their specializations for sharing within the consortium."

Tom Sanville, Executive Director, **OhioLINK**, said:

"Consortia are classic manifestations of 'necessity is the mother of invention.' To be successful a library must provide a greater amount of information to meet the needs of its constituency. Contributing factors aggravating a long standing problem are: 1) The evolution of the global economy. 2) The growing need for more and more rapidly delivered information to succeed in education and commerce. 3) The production of greater amounts of information. 4) Rapidly developing technologies which enable expanded electronic information creation and access. 5) Information consumers' experiences with electronic information which fuel rising expectations for better information resources from traditional information outlets—the libraries. 6) Budgets that continue to fall behind the pace of needed information resources based on the economic models used by commercial information suppliers to sell to individual libraries.

"For these and other reasons, libraries are exercising the power of group purchase to cope better. The purposes are to reduce the

unit cost of information purchased and used, to expand information access and to build a more positive rationale for future investment in information in academic, school, and public library expenditures. If we are entering the age of information, then information must become more affordable and ubiquitous, as in the industrial age was the case with goods and services. Consortia are a mechanism to make this evolution possible."

Both statements are thoughtful and true. Sadly, neither references the role of booksellers.

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Notes and References

1. To gain an understanding of the positive impact "thinking together" can have on organizations, see Senge, Peter M. 1990. *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York, NY: Doubleday/Currency.
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information that can be made available either online or via document delivery, there still is a central role in research and learning for the browsing and serendipity afforded by a physically real library. There is a cultural enrichment that takes place by seeing society's knowledge displayed on library shelves, just as there is unique value in viewing original pieces of art in museums.

University libraries are more than cumbersome filing cabinets; they remain houses where ideas and information of all kinds find protection from the ravages of time. They are central to the university, which itself is supposed to be a community where learning thrives, not just places where we stamp "Grade A" on the butts of graduating seniors and send them out to build their 401(k) fortunes.

In his inaugural address as president of the **University of Utah**, **J. Bernard Machen**

had the courage to remind his own attending state's governor that virtual universities—"limit the broader, more interactive aspects of university education." He went on to state that education that provides "spontaneous debate, discussion, and the exchange of ideas within the classroom is not the cheapest, but is the best." At the close of his speech, he reminded his audience "not to succumb to the temptation to force a college education to its lowest common denominator."

I applaud Dr. Machen's comments. They have the ring of a truth that deserves to outlive the lore that our western governors are trying to attach to this experiment.

By the middle of last summer, WGU had a target of 600 students registered for its course of study. Only 75 had signed up. While that comforts me, I hope it doesn't lull me into a sense of false security. I don't want WGU to fail. I just want it to succeed for what it is: an adjunct to real colleges and universities, not as a model for replacing those institutions...and their libraries.